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Language, Truth, and Literature: A Defence of Literary Humanism

RICHARD GASKIN

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2013, xvii + 376 PP. £50 (HBK).

In *Language, Truth, and Literature*, Richard Gaskin defends literary humanism on the basis that works of literature refer. His writing is a model of composition, concision, and clarity, and *literary humanism* is delineated on the first page of the preface: literary works have an objective meaning, aesthetic value and cognitive value are linked, and the aesthetic-cognitive value of a work of literature is in virtue of the work making true statements about the world (viii). This outline is subsequently developed into a definition consisting of six distinct claims, for each of which convincing evidence is provided. The monograph is divided into sixty-four numbered sections and twelve chapters. The first three chapters establish Gaskin's theory of literature, which is often contrasted with Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen's no-truth theory from *Truth, Fiction, and Literature* (1994), the fourth defends the theory against objections from analytic philosophy, and the remaining eight against objections from literary theory. Gaskin presents compelling critiques of reception theory, the intentional fallacy, and poststructural criticism, with particular attention to the work of Stanley Fish, Terry Eagleton, Jacques Derrida, and Jonathan Bate. The bulk of the preface (x-xvii) is a commentary on changes in higher education in the UK in the last twenty years that will resonate with many academics. I mention this because the final section of the book is written in a similar tone as Gaskin expresses his dissatisfaction with the radicalisation of universities from the late sixties to the present. This personal concern explains why a significant proportion of the book (about two fifths) is directed against deconstructive

criticism, which Gaskin acknowledges as having been discredited by his predecessors, most notably John Searle in “Literary Theory and Its Discontents” (1994) and elsewhere, and John M. Ellis in *Against Deconstruction* (1989).

Gaskin’s approach to literary aesthetics combines the logical rigour of analytic philosophy at its finest with a knowledge of literature as broad as it is deep. He does not hesitate to define elusive terms or make his commitments unequivocal, and moves effortlessly from English to German to Latin to Greek, providing penetrating analyses of the poems of Edward Thomas, Adalbert Stifter’s *Der Nachsommer*, Horace’s “Ibis Liburnis”, and Euripides’ *Hippolytus* (amongst many other literary works). Gaskin’s theory of literature emerges from *linguistic idealism*, the view that the world is composed of true and false propositions, which are in turn composed of objects and properties, and that the world is thus mediately composed of objects and properties (11). He explains that ‘the structure of reality has its origin in the meanings of words (and sentences)’, i.e. sentences with truth values are all there really is (333). This is highly counter-intuitive in one respect, but accounts for the commonsense notion that human beings are unable to conceive of a world which cannot be exhaustively described in language. Although Gaskin employs the term “idealism”, he notes that his thesis is ‘tempered with realism’ (330) because of the implicit answerability to the world, and differentiates it from both Richard Rorty’s pragmatism (7-11) and Derrida’s anti-realism (240-243). Realism is furthermore central to Gaskin’s distinction between text and work: the former is an abstract possibility, the latter a realisation of that possibility by a particular author at a particular time and a particular place. Once this realisation occurs, the work’s ‘literary qualities remain fixed across all possible worlds in which it exists’, as well as over time (75).

With linguistic idealism as a premise, Gaskin adopts Frege's view that the most important constitutive aspects of meaning are reference and sense, defining the latter as the 'mode of presentation of reference' (3). Gaskin holds that fiction is not only inessential to literature, but characteristically factualist, i.e. aims at truth (38). This is understood in terms of the relevance of historicity, the use of the names of real people and places, the use of general terms which refer to universals, and the status of works as incomplete structures which must be completed by the reader (39-51). In literary fictions, the author makes assertions, but the reader is invited to adopt the fictive stance, i.e. to preface the assertions which appear in the content of the work with "it is fictionally the case that". These assertions will, of course, be true (52-53). For most works of literature, which are fictional, the cognitive value of the work resides in reference to universals, which are 'genuine components of the real world' (60). If one accepts linguistic idealism, then the emphasis Gaskin places on universals is uncontroversial, and his conclusion is that 'all works of literature bear on the world by virtue of making, or implying, true statements about the world' (65). With the cognitive value of literature *qua* literature thus demonstrated, the argument for literary humanism is accomplished.

Gaskin is well aware that he will be accused of reducing literature to being an aesthetic means to a cognitive end and distinguishes his position from 'excessive instrumentalism' by admitting the significance of sense (103). He contrasts paraphrase with both elucidation and critical analysis. Elucidation is a minutely-detailed reconstruction of the meaning of a literary work, critical analysis refers to the sense of a literary work, and 'paraphrase has a much grander purpose, namely to state the overall moral purpose of the work' (86). Paraphrase and work have identical reference, but different senses. Gaskin's position is not excessively instrumentalist because for those works which have cognitive value, that value is

located in both the reference and the sense of the work, so the cognitive value of paraphrase and work is not identical. Shortly after making this point, Gaskin addresses objections and responses from analytic philosophy. These are all handled with confidence and competence, so I shall proceed to an objection of my own.

Gaskin opposes the relativism of response theory and deconstructive criticism by claiming that a literary work has a determinate meaning, which is fixed at the time of production and is the meaning which would have been communicated by the work to a ‘fully informed and sensitive’ contemporary audience (181). While I am sympathetic to his resistance to relativism, this is nonetheless a highly contentious claim. Here is an example selected for pure convenience (it happens to be on my desk), from the first paragraph of Thomas Keymer’s introduction in my copy of *Robinson Crusoe* (OUP, 2008): ‘*Robinson Crusoe* also chimes with modern definitions of a literary classic, which stress the hospitality of complex works to multiple, divergent readings’ (vii). Surviving Hume’s test of time seems to involve a capacity for reinterpretation, for rewarding repeated visits, and for maintaining an enduring pertinence to human beings across time and space which is at odds with Gaskin’s account. The determinate meaning of a literary work has a counterpart in his *ultimate paraphrase* of the work, ‘a maximally succinct, and maximally correct, statement of its purpose’ (90). Gaskin’s response to the question of repeated readings is that re-reading ‘helps us to get closer to a work’s reference by honing our rough-and-ready attempts at paraphrase’ (113), i.e. each reading ideally brings the reader one step closer to the work’s ultimate paraphrase. If one could be sure of reaching the ultimate paraphrase of a work ‘and if we could *also* be sure that we had experienced all there was to experience about that work’s sense, then there would indeed be no point in rereading it’ (116). Gaskin suggests that reaching this certainty is unlikely, if not impossible, so the problem appears to dissolve.

The issue is not, however, so straightforward. Gaskin defines “sense” as mode of presentation of reference and therefore similar to the form of a literary work, understood as the way in which the work’s content is presented. If literary sense is akin to literary form, then it is no less likely to be fully experienced than the reference of a literary work. As far as reaching the ultimate paraphrase, the suggestion that this is unlikely to be achieved is questionable given that it is ‘what someone who fully understood the work in question would specify as its overall purpose’ (90). My 1979 edition of Kurt Vonnegut’s *Mother Night* (1961), for example, begins with an author’s introduction, the first sentence of which is: ‘This is the only story of mine whose moral I know’ (vii). This moral is revealed in the second sentence: ‘We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be’ (vii). Ultimate paraphrases are not nearly as elusive as Gaskin implies, and if Vonnegut had written a critical analysis of the literary form of *Mother Night* there would be a maximally succinct and correct guide to experiencing the work’s sense. Armed with the first two sentences of the introduction and the essay on form, there is no need – no *point*, in Gaskin’s terms – in reading the work more than once.

There is something fundamentally wrong with the idea of revisiting literary works for the purpose of reaching the ultimate paraphrase (and sense). The image of Gaskin re-reading Edward Thomas’ poems and me re-reading Vonnegut’s novellas in a circuitous journey towards their final truths strikes me as somewhat pathetic and – thankfully – inaccurate in both cases. I cannot see how fully understanding the reference and sense of *Mother Night* would prevent me from re-reading it; in fact, *contra* Gaskin, reaching this “endpoint” would be a reason to return to the work, safe in the knowledge that I could merely savour the experience without worrying about flaws in my interpretation. Nor do I believe that Gaskin

would put down Thomas' "Lob" never to return in the same circumstances, as revealed in his discussion of the experience of reading Cormac McCarthy's *Border Trilogy*: 'Sitting on a comfortable sofa in the peace of your home, with the scent of freshly brewed coffee wafting through the house, reading *All the Pretty Horses* is an experience of pure pleasure' (121). Yes, it is, and it is precisely this pleasure that Gaskin's theory of literature neglects.

Gaskin *loves* literature – of that, I have no doubt. He defines a literary work in terms of a particular pleasure (32-33), but this pleasure is entirely subordinate to the cognitive value of literature. To this extent I see his book more in the tradition of Aristotle and Sir Philip Sidney rather than Horace, Johnson, and Arnold (64). Like Aristotle and Sidney, Gaskin feels the need to justify the value of literature in terms of something other than the pleasure taken in its appreciation, and – like his precursors – minimises both the pleasure and the value of the pleasure. I am not suggesting that the distinctive kind of pleasure to which Gaskin refers in his definition of a literary work is the only value of literature, or even the most important value, but it is a significant value which Gaskin barely mentions (discussion is restricted to §9, 32-36). Without pleasure, Gaskin's theory is not '*to some extent an instrumentalist doctrine*' (103), but simply *an instrumentalist doctrine* and it is difficult to identify what one would lose by reading author paraphrases and essays instead of the actual works. I do not mean to imply that Gaskin's defence of literary humanism is unsuccessful, merely that one aspect of literary value is overlooked.

To conclude, the monograph is a welcome and consequential contribution to the philosophy of literature which also has something to offer philosophers of language, metaphysicians, epistemologists, ethicists, and literary and critical theorists. Regarding the latter, Gaskin's reach across the analytic-continental divide is an incursion rather than a parley, but it is also

an acknowledgement that the enemy are worth attacking – which is regrettably rare in both camps. He has levelled some severe criticism at literary theorists; if they respond, all those who have an interest in literature will benefit from the dialogue.

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